

Onward

by saiditallbefore

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Summary: Rikki gets a job offer. Meanwhile, Bella wants to give Cleo a surprise party.

Onward

A/N:

Written for audrey1nd for Night on Fic Mountain. Originally posted on AO3.

These characters belong to Jonathan M. Shiff. This fic is unbetaed and is written by an American attempting to imitate Australian slang and spelling. If you see any mistakes, please point them out in the comments.

* * *

><p>Rikki walked down the beach, alone, her shoes in her hand as her feet sank into the sand. This part of the beach stayed fairly isolated, and, anyway, it was fairly early. Still cool enough she was wearing a jacket over her tank top.</p>

"Rikki!"

She turned to see who called her name, and groaned in exasperation. Zane. Still, she stopped walking so he could catch up with her.

"How are you this morning?" he asked when he reached Rikki's side.

Rikki crossed her arms. "What do you want, Zane?"

"Can't a friend just say hi to another friend?" Zane smiled innocently. Rikki gave him a level stare; he threw his hands up. "Fine, fine. I want you to come back to the cafÃ©."

"No." Rikki began walking again.

Zane grabbed her arm, but Rikki yanked it away. "What is your problem?" she demanded.

"My problem is that it's_Rikki's_cafÃ©. And it has heaps of debt."

"Well, maybe if you actually tried working instead of get-rich-quick schemes-"

"How many times do you want me to apologize?"

"I'll let you know when you get there." Rikki smiled tightly at him. It wasn't Zane's fault the Moon Pool was destroyed, not entirely. But that didn't make him any better.

"Look, the paperwork is back in the office to make you a full co-owner, not just a co-manager. I just really need your help."

Rikki's eyebrows rose at the word 'co-owner'. "You really must be bad off."

Zane didn't say anything, just stuffed his hands in his pockets and looked away.

"I'll think about it, alright?" It_was_appealing. Buying the cafÃ©, fixing it up, having live music- it had all been her idea. And all Zane knew about money was how to spend it.

She was just on the verge of saying yes when her phone rang.

"Hello?" Rikki answered.

Bella's voice rang out. "We're having an urgent meeting at Will's place now."

"On my way." Rikki ended the call. "I'll talk to you later, Zane."

"Remember- paperwork's in our office!"

* * *

><p>When Rikki arrived at Will's boathouse, Will was showing Emma a few of his rare shells and Bella was pacing frantically.<p>

"What's the big emergency?" Rikki asked.

"It's Cleo's birthday tomorrow!" Bella threw her hands in the air.

"It is?" Will sounded surprised.

"Look, whatever you're planning- " Emma was getting that little worry-winkle between her eyebrows again.

"I'm not planning anything yet! I didn't even know it was her birthday until Lewis mentioned it in an email!" Bella bit her lip.

"Cleo just doesn't like her birthday." When did I become the peacemaker around here?

"Why's that?" Will asked.

Emma and Rikki exchanged looks. Cleo wouldn't want them to tell, but they were already this far. Emma nodded, and the two girls explained to Will and Bella what some of Cleo's previous birthday parties had been like.

"Well, we just need to throw her a good party this year," Bella said resolutely, when the explanation was complete.

"I don't know if that's such a good idea," Emma said.

"I think we should go for it. Cleo likes parties; let's get all her friends together and give her a good one." Will smiled at Bella. No surprise he was supporting his girlfriend.

Rikki and Emma exchanged glances again. Funny how they could still read each other so well after a year apart. "Fine," Emma said. "But she's not going to go for it."

"So we'll make it a surprise party," Bella replied.

Emma pursed her lips, probably irritated at having someone else take charge. "Right, then. Tomorrow, you and Will keep Cleo distracted while Rikki and I put everything together."

* * *

><p>Emma slammed the door of her flat behind them. She'd moved into it when she came back to the Coast; said it was closer to uni. Rikki just figured even Emma could get tired of her family after spending a whole year with them. "Can you believe her nerve, bossing us around like that?"<p>

"I know," Rikki teased. "Someone should tell her you're the only one allowed to be bossy."

Emma smiled and playfully shoved at Rikki. "Shut up!"

The two girls made their way to the kitchen. Rikki rummaged around in the fridge. She waited for Emma to yell at her for messing up the organizational system- Emma claimed it was organized by expiration date, with nearest in the front- but Emma sat at the kitchen bench and began writing in a notepad. Rikki, her mouth full of leftover Thai takeaway she'd found, peered at Emma's scribblings over her shoulder.

"You're taking care of food, guests, venue, and decorations? Are you planning on doing all the work yourself?" Rikki asked incredulously.

"Of course not. You're going to help me." Emma lifted her chin resolutely. "Cleo's one of my best friends, and I'm going to make

sure she has a great birthday. Even if it_was_Bella's idea." She mumbled the last part darkly. "I just have no idea where we're going to have the party. Mr Sertori would let us have it at his house, but I want something more special than that."

Rikki remembered her conversation with Zane on the beach that morning. _It's __Rikki's__ CafÃ©_, he'd said.

"I have an idea." Rikki stuffed another bite into her mouth and grabbed her jacket. "Call you later!"

* * *

><p>The cafÃ© looked the same as ever, or at least as it had since Sophie had redecorated it like a jungle. What's wrong with keeping things simple? Why does everyone think the cafÃ© needs a gimmick? But it was strangely empty for a Saturday afternoon. Only a few people were there drinking juice. Sophie was there, too, wiping down tables.

Rikki knocked on the office door.

"He's not in today," Sophie called.

Rikki whirled to face Sophie. "Well, do you know where he is?"

"Hard to say. He stays so busy, you know. But as co-manager, I could help you. If you needed something." Sophie's smile was predatory.

"I'll just give him a call." Rikki stalked outside and immediately dialled Zane on her mobile. It rang half a dozen times and went to his voice mail. She called him back three more times, then gave up. Obviously he wasn't going to answer.

Rikki took a deep breath and re-entered the cafÃ©. _For Cleo.

—

Sophie was sitting behind the counter, reading a textbook. "Did you need my help after all?" She asked sweetly.

"I need the cafÃ© for a party tomorrow night," Rikki said.

"Sorry, we're booked." Sophie tapped a pen to her lips. "We might have some openings next week."

"Good for you." That wouldn't work. Cleo's birthday was the next day. "Well, see you never."

Rikki strode away from the cafÃ©. She walked faster and faster until she was at a near-run, pausing only when she reached a deserted section of the beach. She glanced around her to make sure no one was watching. Then she sprinted into the water, diving underneath the surface before her transformation.

She swam out to the deep water. Here, dolphins played and schools of brightly coloured fish flitted about. It was peaceful, in a way life above water never was. To think, she could have lived her entire life without swimming in the deep like this, if she hadn't been stranded on Mako.

What am I going to do about Cleo's party? They could have it at the beach, but then someone would have to haul down tables for the food and equipment to play music. _Maybe Bella can get Will to carry all thatâ€¢_

Problem was, the beach just didn't feel special enough. It was better than having the party at the Sertoris', but it still wasn't what Rikki'd had in mind. Maybe the cafâ© wasn't all that special, but it had been one of their places. It still was, on the increasingly rare occasions Bella and Nate's band played there.

She'd been stupid to think she could recapture the magic.

No, the beach was good. Together, she and Emma could make it work.

Rikki swam into the Moon Pool on Mako Island. Here was another place that would never be the same. The pool didn't bubble magically on full moon nights. The walls were scarred from where Sophie and Ryan had mined the crystals.

In her excitement over Zane's offer, Rikki had forgotten about Sophie. That girl was impossible to work with- Rikki had already fired her once! And that was before Sophie had helped ruin the Moon Pool. _What was I thinking, going back to work with Zane? He's impossible! They both are- he just makes excuses for her!_ Even being co-owner couldn't make her work with Sophie.

No, Rikki wasn't going to Zane up on his offer. It just wasn't worth her sanity to work with someone as devious and backstabbing as Sophie.

Footsteps alerted Rikki to an intruder. She made a fist, boiling the water in the pool and allowing the steam to obscure her from sight. She was about to sink under the water and swim away when-

"Rikki? What are you doing here?" Zane called. Rikki released her fist; the steam dissipated. "Where's your little mermaid club?"

"What are you doing here?" Rikki demanded.

Zane scowled. "Sorry, I forgot Will's the only boy toy allowed here now."

"Zane." Rikki's tone brooked no argument.

"I've been looking for a way to fix all this-" Zane gestured to the ruined cave walls. "I wanted it to be a surprise, but-"

"Fix it? How could you possibly fix this? The magic is gone!"

Zane knelt at the pool's edge and began to speak earnestly. "You said you made the tower of light with just the crystals in your necklaces, right? And Will got all the crystals back from Sophie. So I was thinking, maybe there's a way to put the crystals back in the cave."

"What, so they can get stolen again?" Rikki's voice echoed throughout

the small cave.

"You think they're safe in dive-boy's little boathouse?" He does have a point. They could trust Will with the crystals, but what if Sophie stole them again? Or if someone else broke into his boathouse and took them? Most of the time, the place wasn't even locked.

Zane forged on. "I thought maybe there was a way to set the crystals back into the wall. Or in the bottom of the pool, if you girls would help with that."

"The bottom of the pool?" Rikki asked.

"I mean, they're just ideas for now. It would take a while to get done."

"Why are you doing this?" Zane was so rarely kind just because. Everything he did had ulterior motives.

Zane ran a hand through his hair. "I just feel like this is my fault. Maybe I couldn't have stopped Sophie, but I should have distracted her or something. If I hadn't been so stupid about the crystals, tooâ€|"

"If you hadn't hired Sophie back to work for youâ€|" Rikki didn't even try to keep the accusation out of her voice.

"She's a good manager." Zane was defensive.

"Whatever. Look, I'm not discussing this with you right now. I've got to help plan Cleo's birthday party."

"I thought Cleo didn't have birthday parties."

"We wanted to do something nice for her." Not that you would know anything about that, she added silently.

"You should have it at the cafÃ©," Zane said. "Speaking of, have you thought any more about my offer?"

"Sophie said it's booked tomorrow, and that's when we need it." Rikki carefully avoided the subject of Zane's offer to be co-owner.

"We'll tell them something came up. You're a friend; your name's on the building. You should get to use it whenever you like." Zane was earnest again; he was always either fully earnest or fully cynical, with no in-between. Unfortunately, it's also what made him so difficult to get on with.

Rikki gave him a disbelieving look. "No, you can't. It's no wonder you're losing money, Zane! You can't run a business that way!"

"Fair enough." Zane licked his lips. "But did you think about my offer? I'm serious, you know: co-owner."

"I can't," Rikki said. "We've already tried working together, and look how that turned out. We just aren't compatible."

Zane furrowed his brows. "Are you talking about work, or us?" He gestured between them, as if trying to clear up any confusion about

what "us" meant.

"Does it really matter?" With a flip of her tail, Rikki dived under the pool's surface and away from Zane.

* * *

><p>"We can't have the party at the beach! The weather report says it's supposed to rain!" Emma fretted. Rikki was in Emma's flat again, comparing notes on plans for Cleo's party.<p>

"You've got to be kidding." Normally Rikki would make fun of Emma for being so melodramatic, but in this case, she had a point. If it rained, they wouldn't be able to go outside without turning into mer-freaks.

"We need another venue." Emma paced the length of her living room. "What about the cafÃ©?"

"Tried it. Sophie said they're booked." Rikki made a face.

"You sure? I heard business was pretty down there," Emma said.

"Positive. Sophie told me herself."

Emma looked apologetic, like she was about to ask something really horrible. "Sorry to ask this, but could you call Zane and check?" Ah, there it was. "It's just- Sophie doesn't exactly like us."

"Not like I'm Zane's favourite person these days, either." What Emma didn't know wouldn't kill her.

"Oh, would you stop whining and call him?" Seemed Emma had lost patience with being apologetic.

Rikki glared at Emma, but nevertheless, she pulled her mobile out of her pocket. She moved to Emma's bedroom as she dialled Zane's number; just because Emma could make her call Zane didn't mean she was allowed to listen in.

"Hello?" Zane answered.

"It's me," Rikki said. "Emma wants me to check if the cafÃ© is really booked tomorrow night."

"Emma wants you to check?" Zane sounded incredulous.

"It's supposed to rain tomorrow," Rikki explained.

"Ah," Zane said, understanding. "Here, I'm at the cafÃ© now. Just let me pull up the calendar on the computer..." Rikki could hear him tapping on the keyboard. Feeling awkward, she examined the photos on Emma's dresser: some of her family from their trip, some of all four mermaids from over the summer, and one from a few years ago, after Rikki had just met the others. They looked so young.

"There's not anything on the calendar for tomorrow. We haven't really had any parties for a few weeks, since Bella and Nate's band stopped playing for us."

"Sophie told them she'd found replacements!" Rikki exclaimed.

"Right," Zane said softly. "So you'll be booking the cafÃ© for tomorrow, then?"

"Be there at, say, seven?" That would give them enough time to set up before Bella arrived with Cleo.

"Six," he agreed.

* * *

><p>When Rikki and Emma arrived at the cafÃ© the next day, Zane was there. Sophie, thankfully, was not.</p>

Zane didn't seem to know what to do with himself, so he hovered awkwardly near the counter while Emma and Rikki hung streamers and tied balloons. Finally, Rikki gave up.

Making a face, Rikki said, "Zane, if you're going to be in here, you might as well make yourself useful."

"Useful? Please." Emma rolled her eyes. "Hand me the blue streamers?"

Rikki reached for the blue streamers, but Zane darted in front of her, picked them up, and handed them off to Emma. Emma climbed on a chair to hang the streamers.

Zane plucked at several balloon strings, tied to the back of a chair. "Have you thought any more about what I said yesterday?" He looked at Rikki. "About the Moon Pool, not- not the other thing."

"What about the Moon Pool?" Emma asked sharply.

"I think I can help you fix it," Zane said. "Put the crystals back in."

Emma stepped down from her chair. "Even if we believed you, why would we let you?"

"Look, I've helped save you more times than I can count."

"That's not hard," Emma said under her breath.

Zane ignored her and kept talking. "I've kept your little secret. I might not be part of your little club, but you could at least hear me out."

"He's got a point," Rikki murmured.

The door burst open. Nate stood there, his arms outstretched. "Heard there's a party here tonight."

"We'll talk later," Zane said.

There was no more time for talking after that. Nate's band set up and performed a sound check- without Bella, unfortunately, as she was

with Cleo. Guests began to arrive in groups of twos or threes: friends of Cleo's from school and work. Rikki knew most of them, but there were a few unfamiliar to her. Rikki and Zane hung a banner that read "Happy Birthday Cleo!" across the room with directions from Emma.

When did having two lives become so normal?

Finally, a few minutes after seven, Emma got a call from Bella.

"Cleo's going to be here in two minutes! Everyone, act natural," Emma ordered. Since that's what everyone had been doing, they ignored her.

A few minutes later, Rikki heard Cleo outside saying, "I don't know; maybe we should go somewhere else."

"Come on, Cleo. I really want a Berry Burst. We can get it takeaway if you like." Bella said plaintively.

"Fine," Cleo said, persuaded. By now, the entire cafÃ© was hushed, waiting for Cleo's entrance.

"I really don't see why we couldn't go to—" Cleo opened the door, but she was looking over her shoulder, talking to Bella.

"SURPRISE!" the party guests exclaimed, more or less in unison.

"You guys!" Cleo seemed at a loss for words; she grinned and clasped her hands together. Rikki and Emma pushed their way forward to her.

"Happy birthday," Emma said. "I hope this isn't too much. I know you don't like celebrating your birthday—"

"I love it! Thank you so much!" Cleo hugged Emma, then Bella, then Rikki.

* * *

><p>"I'd like to dedicate this next song to the birthday girl, one of my very best friends: Cleo Sertori!" Bella launched in to "You're Everything".<p>

Cleo beamed. "That's so sweet." She was surrounded by friends, and Rikki only knew half of them.

"Sweet," Rikki echoed. "I'm going to get a juice. Do you want anything?"

"No thanks," Cleo said. Her attention was then captured by girl with spiky dark hair, and they began a conversation about Ronnie and the marine park.

Zane was working behind the bar.

"One Mango Madness," Rikki said.

"I fired Sophie." Zane didn't look like he was about to make her

smoothie.

"I thought she was supposed to be a brilliant manager," Rikki said.

"You're better. I'd rather have you as co-owner _and_co-manager." He pulled out the ingredients for Rikki's order. "One Mango Madness coming up."

"Okay."

"What?" Zane turned his head to look at Rikki comically fast.

"I'll be co-owner, but you actually have to listen to my suggestions. You can't just do whatever you want, whenever you want."

"Neither can you."

"And we'll get rid of the ridiculous tropical decorations." Those were Sophie's idea anyway; Zane probably wasn't overly attached to them.

"Deal. But you can't go running off to Mako every time there's a problem."

I don't do that...do I? "I want Cleo and Lewis to approve your plans for fixing the Moon Pool. They know the most about how it works."

"I'm not stupid," Zane sniped.

"Depends on who you ask," Rikki retorted.

"Fine," Zane agreed. "Partners?" They shook hands.

* * *

><p>AN: I couldn't find a date for Cleo's birthday anywhere, but I tried to keep as close to canon as I could. The calendar Cleo looks at in her birthday episode doesn't have a month on it, but if we assume the episode takes place in 2006, the year it aired, then we can deduce that her birthday is April 19th, 1990. Therefore, this fic takes place on April 18th and 19th, 2009- Cleo's 19th birthday.</p>

Also, apologies that this is probably less shippy than you would have liked.

End
file.